



THE SURVIVORS CHILD[©]

A collection of short stories

by

Sally B. Kepnes

a child of Holocaust survivors



This is a collection of short stories told to me by my parents Lena and Abraham Bencel. They are survivors of the holocaust. My father Abraham survived Dachau and my mother Lena survived Stutthov. Although my father's mother died of a brain hemorrhage, my other three grandparents died in sanctification of Gd. (known in Hebrew as Kiddush Hashem). It is interesting to note that my parents never stressed the horrors of the concentration camp but rather the acts of kindness, friendship, and concern that people exemplified. Of course, they mentioned the enemies and their reactions and those who displayed extraordinary courage often at the expense of their own lives.

I have also included a few pieces of personal stories as being a child of Holocaust survivors and my upbringing.

My ultimate goal is to give this work to my own children as a legacy and to share this work with those who will teach about the holocaust to other children - Jewish or Gentile.

My parents always held that education could help to conquer many of the ills of society and I also hold that only through education can we eradicate prejudice of society as a whole.

THE SELECTION

My father (may his memory be for a blessing) was an industrial electrician. He was apprenticed as a young man (immediately after his Bar Mitzvah) to an older man who needed an assistant. My father loved light. He told me the first thing he ever did electrically was to make his Simchat Torah flag pole light up at the top. He had a successful small business in Kovno, Lithuania , married my mother and they had one child before the war.

In the camp, he did what he had to in order to survive. It happened one day that the Nazi who was in charge of his group, knowing my father's skill ordered him to "select" a group of nine or ten men to help my father on a job. This was very difficult. After all, how could he decide who to take? It meant someone would live another day, maybe get some better food or even warmer clothing.

Dad returned to the bunker and told the men what he had been ordered to do. The men decided amongst themselves to select the work brigade. I would often ask my father , "Why didn't you just take your friends?"

He always answered, "We selected two doctors, two lawyers, two teachers, three electricians and myself. We decided that if any of these intelligent men survived -- they would tell what had happened to them and they would be believed !!"

THE REUNION

My father was liberated by the Americans. He was shot in the leg during the the liberation. An American soldier had a German guard stay with my father while the American went to get a medic. The American made it very clear to the German guard that if anything happened to dad, the German would be shot. Father had lost all of his family except for a brother and sister who had come to America before the war. My father received proper medical attention and after rehabilitation, he stayed in Munich, rented a room, began to work as an electrician, and looked for my mother.

My mother was liberated by the Russians. She was quite ill and was taken to a hospital to be rehabilitated and returned to strength. She had a child in the ghetto and both children died there. She did not know if her sister, brother or my father were alive. I continue to wonder how she stayed sane.

After some time, she received word that a false passport had been arranged for her. It seems that you had to be of Polish citizenship to get out of that sector. She had to go on a wagon at night and cross the border to get to the American zone. The only other people traveling this way were gypsies, prostitutes, and criminals. I asked her, "Weren't you afraid?"

She answered, "I was going to your father and I really didn't care. After all, I had seen so much and lost my children and maybe my whole family. If this was the chance that I could be reunited with dad, it was a chance I was going to take."

They were reunited in Munich. My father had arranged all of the papers for my mother through the underground and paid for this with his earnings. When my mother arrived, he had prepared a room for them. My mother's sister and brother did survive. My mother continued to recuperate, my father continued to work. I was born in Munich in November, 1947. In 1950 we came to the US. Their marriage was one constant devotion and stands as an example of true love and true devotion.

MILK

In the ghetto, there were many families living close together. They shared everything they had. My father had the opportunity to "get out" because of his work. Often people would give him the little money they had or a valued possession or even a piece of clothing to trade with the farmers for a bit of food - potatoes, milk, or cheese.

Often he came back with food that the Nazis discovered and for which he was severely beaten. One time he came back with a liter of milk for my brother and sister. He instructed my mother to measure out a cup of milk for their two children and share the remainder with his sister who had several small children and the other families in the house.

It amazes me to this day.

The Rabbi

Another favorite story that my father told was about the Rabbi in the ghetto who wouldn't eat. This was of great concern to the entire community. They were well aware that the meager food they received certainly wouldn't be kosher but the Rabbi was their spiritual leader and his survival was critical.

Community leaders finally convinced the Rabbi that they would find some way to obtain dairy products from the nearby farms if only the Rabbi would consent to eat. The Rabbi agreed to eat the dairy products.

My father was not a community leader or a learned man. His family was religious and he was observant. Being a working person with a trade, he was one of the men who went out to get food for the Rabbi. The Rabbi's last name was Solveitchik.

My connections to Judaism do not come from a legacy of scholars or rabbis but from plain, religious, peasant people who observed the Torah and mitzvot. The caring and concern for less fortunate and the synagogue were always evident as I grew up.

Hebrew School

This is not really a holocaust story. I grew up the only child of survivors so this is a piece I will share with you as my observations from my perspective.

Hebrew school interefered with my "life". When I was in third grade it was necessary for my parents to send me to afternoon Hebrew school. I would have much rather continued to play with my friends, watch TY, or go to the Jewish Community Center to do arts and crafts or something . Hebrew school was the bane of my existence.

As I sat there having to learn the alef-bais (before the "new " Hebrew), reciting chapters and verses from the Chumash (Bible) and reciting the Siddur and writing, I truly believed my parents had decided to torture me.

I was just barely surviving going to public school, ballet lessons, music lessons and HEBREW SCHOOL. The only thing that I enjoyed was the Y (JCC) . I was active in the Bnai Brith Girls and we had a wonderful social group. Why my parents insisted on this Hebrew education remained a mystery to me for a very long time.

I was in eighth grade of public school and sixth grade of Hebrew school. I was going to GRADUATE from Hebrew school. I was in seventh heaven. I would go to High School without this Hebrew school business and be able to concentrate on my "social" activities at the Y.

Well, I bet you already guessed. I wasn't so lucky. One of the teachers, a Mrs Babin - may she rest in peace - told my parents about the Prozdor , the High School division of the Hebrew College in Brookline. Everyone (but me!) decided that I was qualified to take the entrance exam and that I would certainly attend. If this wasn't bad enough, I was to give the valedictory speech at the Hebrew school graduation in YIDDISH. It was a wonder I didn't run away from home.

It was a wonderful graduation from Hebrew school. I got a lot of applause for my speech and received a scholarship to the Hebrew High School.

FIGHTING BACK

The most interesting question students ask me when I teach about Holocaust is, "Why didn't they fight back?"

This is a reasonable question from those who grow up in a free society and don't understand or know some history of the Jews in general.

Everyone has heard of the "Warsaw Ghetto" uprising and even some of the smaller revolts. It seems difficult for people to comprehend that no one in the world sought to help or save the Jews. This fact has been documented in many scholarly works and is finally reaching the consciousness of many.

The one message I learn from my parents is their survival was their way of "fighting back". Since the goal was to exterminate the Jews, my parents and the sacred few that did survive did in fact fight back -- they survived. Moreover, the children they were able to have and raise grew up keenly aware of their special relationship to Judaism. The grandchildren of survivors are the strongest weapons they now have to "fight back".

ON BEING JEWISH

It takes a long time to understand different things about your parents. I could not figure out why parents wanted to be Jewish. Their Judaism has caused them so much pain and suffering that the only rational thing, it seemed to me, was stay away, far away from this Judaism.

After all, you don't keep banging your head on a wall and you don't keep your hand on a hot stove.

The only thing my mother said to me when I asked her about this was that their faith was the only thing they had. The Nazis could take everything from them but not their faith. It takes a long time to understand this.

The best story I have to share in this regard has to do with a Friday afternoon carpool. Any parent who has children going to day school understands that the Friday afternoon carpool is the worst one to have. The entire school gets out at approximately the same time and everyone is in a rush to get ready for Shabbat.

It happened that my mother was with me one Friday when it was my turn to do the carpool. She sat in the front seat with me and watched the students coming out of school. The kids were wearing their kippot, their jackets emblazoned with MAIMONIDES on the back and a Jewish star on the front.

She said in Yiddish, "Look at that, they wear the Jewish star on them with freedom and pride. We had to wear the "Gelle Lattes" – the yellow patch to make us feel that we were nothing."

Her grandchildren know they are Jews.

As I have shared before, the only weapons minority groups have to combat poverty, prejudice, crime have are their children and their education. In the Jewish tradition we are fortunate to have , as the prime example, those mothers who stood at Mt. Sinai prior to receiving the ten commandments and agreed to give their children as "security" to Hakodesh Boruch Hu. This second generation of slaves who left Egypt already understood that their children would need this education to combat whatever they would face in the unfamiliar world to come.

I only hope that my work will open the hearts and minds of all children and adults, make them aware of man's capacity for evil and also his capacity for good. If we start by educating ourselves and our children -- the holy one Blessed be he will grant us Peace - Shalom.

